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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001804

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SUBJECT: ADDITIONAL DETAILS ON TROIKA VISIT TO NORTH KOREA

REF: A. SEOUL 1771  
[1](#)B. SEOUL 1672

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During the EU Troika's October 26-30 visit to North Korea, interlocutors had consistently stressed that Pyongyang was ready to discuss "anything" with Washington, without preconditions, according to EU Commission DCM Uwe Wissenbach. The 2009 harvest appeared to have been only slightly worse than the previous year and food appeared to be widely available at unofficial markets, albeit in limited amounts and usually at a high price for non-elites. Private plots were tended with great care, using practically "every inch" of arable land, and the produce sold or bartered at unofficial markets. Provincial hospitals faced a constant and critically acute shortage of basic medicines. Wissenbach observed a growing diversity of luxury vehicles on the streets of Pyongyang, including a Porsche Cayenne and a Hummer. Propaganda banners/posters for the "100-Day Battle" economic mobilization campaign were omnipresent, as were signboards counting down the days left in the drive -- as if to give voice to the unspoken desire of the populace to "just get the thing over with." End summary.

"Tell Washington We Are Ready to Talk"

[1](#)2. (C) EU Commission DCM Uwe Wissenbach met with PolOffs November 6 to provide some additional insights from the EU Troika's October 26-30 visit to North Korea. Wissenbach, who was part of the delegation, said the consistent theme of all their meetings with DPRK officials was: Please tell Washington that we are ready to talk about anything, without preconditions.

Harvest Off Slightly from '08

[1](#)3. (C) Wissenbach said that, according to EU technical experts living in Pyongyang, the state grain harvest had been completed in most areas; this year's crop was slightly worse than that of 2008 because of moderate weather damage. He noted that World Food Program staff were the only aid officials resident in the DPRK who were predicting dire food shortages (ref a). Wissenbach related that, according to NGO officials who traveled widely in the DPRK, food is nearly always available at unofficial markets, albeit in limited amounts and usually at a high price for non-elite North Korean families. Based on observations during visits to EU

projects in North and South Pyongan provinces, Wissenbach said the unofficial markets had clearly taken over for the defunct public distribution system; people were tending their private plots with great care, using practically "every inch" of arable land, and selling or bartering the produce at the markets. Cabbages, he said, "were everywhere, even in Pyongyang." The black market exchange rate was 3,000 North Korean Won to the Euro, he added.

#### Medicines Badly Needed in Provinces...

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14. (C) While food was widely available, Wissenbach asserted, there was a constant and critically acute shortage of basic medicines in local hospitals. During a visit to the primary hospital in North Pyongan province's Hyangsan County, he said the facility had one small bottle of antibiotics and a small supply of traditional Korean herbal medicines with which to treat patients. Wissenbach related that, with regard to medicine, North Korean provincial officials practically begged the EU to fill the gap left by the significant reduction of U.S. and ROK aid.

#### ...While High-End Cars Cruise Streets of Pyongyang

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15. (C) Despite the grim situation in the provinces, Wissenbach emphasized that the Troika delegation received no information or rumors about unrest or regime instability. To the contrary, Wissenbach said elite North Koreans seemed increasingly comfortable with conspicuous displays of wealth. Wissenbach, a frequent traveler to Pyongyang, related that there appeared to be a growing diversity of luxury vehicles on the streets of the capital, including a Porsche Cayenne and a Hummer.

#### Counting Down "100-Day Battle"

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16. (C) Wissenbach said propaganda banners/posters for the "100-Day Battle" economic mobilization campaign were omnipresent, as were signboards counting down the days left in the drive -- as if to give voice to the unspoken desire of the populace to "just get the thing over with." Echoing what we have heard elsewhere (ref b), the regime continued to use the campaign to occupy people with busywork. Wissenbach said there were large groups of people carrying shovels on the streets of Pyongyang; the campaign's only "achievements," he said, appeared to be some new apartment complexes that he described as "decidedly modest."

STEPHENS